

'Our children have to decide' what to do about 377A: Desmond Lee

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SINGAPORE - People arguing for the repeal of the law that criminalises sex between men may want it to happen sooner rather than later, but substantial social change takes time and needs persuasive discussions, said Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee and sociology don Paulin Straughan.

They made the point during a panel discussion at an Institute of Policy Studies conference on diversity on Friday (Oct 26).

The panel moderator Eleanor Wong, an associate professor of law at the National University of Singapore, had raised the issue of Section 377A of the penal code, saying it acted like "prison gates" on the LGBT community, preventing them from being accepted by society.

Mr Lee said the issue is one that is deeply divisive and its resolution may reside in future generations.

After all, he added, Singapore society has already evolved and become more accepting of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and will likely continue to evolve further.

"In issues such as this - fraught with emotion, personal values, very contrasting visions of what the future will look like - the dialogue must continue, be robust and respectful. Our children must decide for themselves."

He noted that in countries which have repealed similar laws or legalised gay marriage, the changes "did not settle the matter in the hearts and minds of people".

India most recently joined the list of countries that have taken such steps. Last month, it repealed its law against consensual gay sex - a law that it, like Singapore, had inherited from the British.

The discussion between Mr Lee and Prof Straughan, who is professor of sociology (practice) at Singapore Management University, was on the need for greater acceptance of all members of society and to remove the stigma against marginalised groups, whether the mentally ill, the disabled or the LGBT community.

During the question and answer session, a conference delegate noted that unlike mental illness or disability, there are laws criminalising the innate behaviours and feelings of LGBT individuals in Singapore. And for real acceptance to happen, such a law should be repealed.

Prof Straughan responded: "No one should feel that they have to live with less because they are born different. The question is, how do we meaningfully advance their well-being and make sure that every single Singaporean has a place in nation-building and a sense of ownership?"

"The question is, what is the best way? Is it charging head on and disrupting everyday life, or is it through persuasive engagement? I don't have the answer but I do think... we should leverage the gains we have made so we can climb higher together."